Does Your Name Match Your Gender?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I ask the question, “does your name match your gender?” When it comes to naming a child in this society, it is almost necessary to name your child based on their gender. If you have a boy, you must name it a boy name, and if it’s a girl, she must have a girl name. But what makes a name feminine or masculine? Every day, people assume someone’s gender based on their name, proving that they go hand in hand. But having your name match you gender is not a law, so why do people worry about it so much? Because of the social norms that societies around the world have created. Because of these social norms, if you have a name that doesn’t match your gender, people will not only look at you funny, but your social life and professional life could be affected by it.

KEY WORDS: *Gender, language, name, social norms, girl name, boy name, unisex, male, female, professional life, social life.*

Does Your Name Match Your Gender?

Do you have a name for a girl or a boy? Does your name represent your gender? Nowadays, it is almost necessary in our society to have a name that correlates to your gender. If you meet someone new, say you’re a boy, and your name is Leslie, people will look at you somewhat strange. But, this isn’t an idea that is a fact of life, it is a social “norm” that societies from all around the world have created. Before writing this paper, I had no idea how to decipher a girl’s name from a boy’s name aside from hearing it and making a guess on what it sounded like. I am a part of this society that assumes someone’s gender based on their name, I am not exempt, I have been the same way my whole life. It is an interesting concept to think about. Why are things considered masculine and why feminine? And how come only guys can be masculine and women be feminine? Our language has gender based all throughout, especially when it comes to naming, but it is hard to notice when you’re not looking for it.

When a child is born, it is typical to wait to find out the gender in order to pick out the name. When the parent’s find out it’s a boy, they pick a “boy” name, and same for if the child is a girl. But, how do we know which names are female and which are male? Is there a specific reasoning behind it, or do we just “know?” There is even a website out there called genderchecker.com that will decide if the name submitted is for a girl, a boy, or if the name is unisex. Meaning that the name could be used for a boy or a girl. The question is, how does that website know the difference? According to the Gender Checker website, their database is created using information from the 2001 and 2011 Census Data in the UK. They also use information from multiple other online sources and website visitors (Bridge, 2008). One of the big issues with names for boys and girls brings up the question, what if a girl had a boy’s name, or vice versa? What exactly does that mean? Is it wrong, incorrect, illegal, or just different? A lot of people have different views, but most of society looks at it as being somewhat weird. Also, a normal thing to think about is when someone tells you their name or you hear a name from somewhere and it sound “manly” or it sounds “girly”, what does that mean? How can something sound girly or manly? It is a social norm that we, as a society around the world, have created unconsciously. But, everyday people aren’t the only one’s predicting gender based on names, Facebook is doing the same work as we speak.

Have you ever wondered how Facebook knows your gender? You don’t put that information into their databases when you sign up, they do it for you. But, how? According to the article “What’s in a Name: A Study of Names, Gender Inference, and Gender Behavior in Facebook,” Facebook gets its gender information by looking at its user’s first names. They look through profile pages of around 2 million users in New York City to create a complete and up to date list of names. This list is “annotated with a popularity estimate and a gender probability” (Tang, Ross, Saxena, & Chen, n.d., p. 2). Information that I found to be extremely interesting was when the article states that “having inferred the gender of most users in our Facebook dataset, we learn several interesting gender characteristics and analyze how males and females behave in Facebook” (Tang, Ross, Saxena, & Chen, n.d., p. 2). This was a bit of information that really made me think. This means they have also learned to decipher the gender of a user’s name based on the way that they interact on Facebook. The information they found was that women and men show different behaviors when it comes to showing and hiding their attributes such as age, gender, and sexual preference. And also that women are more aware of their privacy given to them online than men are (Tang, Ross, Saxena, & Chen, n.d., p. 10). When deciding if someone is male or female based on their name in everyday life, it is different. We hear their name and automatically think girl or boy. Databases and websites have all different kinds of ways to decide someone’s gender based on their name, but again, it all comes from the social norms we have created as a world society. But it’s not just the names of people that gender plays a role in, gender plays a role in the name of companies and products as well.

In our society, things with manly names are supposed to be for men and feminine names are for women. But the issues come into play when a woman wants to use something with a manly name or vice versa. According to William Lozito (2008) at Name Wire, a product naming blog, products with a more feminine sounding name have been shown to attract more women, while names that are more masculine and “hard” seem to attract more men (Lozito, 2008, par. 6). With this social norm created with naming, even products are taking a hit from it. If something has a more feminine name, what about that name makes the men stray away from it? Anna North (2010), from Jezebel, adds to that notion in her article when she writes “When men do feminine things, they are debasing themselves” (North, 2010, par. 4). Meaning that a guy can’t do a “feminine” thing without it looking like he is degrading himself and showing shame to his gender. Lozito (2008) also shares that “women appear to prefer the taste of feminine sounding brand name cigarettes to those with more masculine names” (Lozito, 2008, par. 5). Is it really the taste of the cigarette that keeps the women coming back for more, or is it just the name? It doesn’t help that along with the “feminine” name, it most likely also had a feminine design to the front of it, showing that it was “for women” anyways. Design on packaging is an idea that is looked at constantly when it comes to buying for men and women. If it has a large action figure, big tractor, or even something that has to do with hunting (all things manly under the social norm), a woman is most likely not going to buy it, therefore not knowing the true quality of the product. Showing that women are most likely going to like the product with the feminine name and packaging because that is what caught her eye first. We all know that having a gender specific name can mean a lot when it comes to the way someone looks at you, but would it affect your professional business life as well?

According to Jenna Goudreau (2015) at Business Insider, “if you are a woman with a gender neutral name, you may be more likely to succeed in certain fields” (Goudreau, 2015, par. 11). With gender-neutral meaning a name that can be used for a man or a woman, it raises the question: Why does it have to be gender neutral only when it comes to a woman? A lot of the time, when you think of someone who works in business, you think of a business man first over a business woman. Maybe, when a parent wants their child to a be a business woman, they will purposely pick a gender neutral name to help them along, maybe they know the social norm that has been created in the workplace. Goudreau (2015) also articulates that men with shorter first names are more than likely to be a large chunk of the people in the c-suites and also women at the top of a business are more likely to use their full names (Goudreau, 2015, par. 12). So why is it that men are said to have a short first name such as “Tim” and women feel the need to use their full names to be respected. Your name says a lot when it comes to other people. A large portion of the time, they will judge you right off the bat by your name. But what if your name wasn’t completely your parent’s choice? What if you had to follow a strict law.

In Germany, according to David K. Isreal (2010) at CNN, “you must be able to tell the gender of the child by their first name” (Isreal, 2010, par. 6). It is not a choice, it is not a freedom like it is in other countries like the US, it is a law. Could you imagine not being able to have a gender neutral name? It is also a law in Denmark stating that it is necessary to be able to indicate a child’s gender from their name (Isreal, 2010, par. 13). Having laws like these further the social norms and rules that we have created unconsciously. This doesn’t help people with names that do not match their gender, it only hurts them. But, there are more and more people these days who are giving their children non gender based names. According to Sarah Springer (2012) at CNN, in the past 40 years, parents have been discovering new territory when it comes to names and “stretching the boundaries of how names are connected to gender by naming more little girls with what used to be the domain of boys” (Springer, 2012, par. 11). This gives hope that the US is becoming more of a country that doesn’t judge someone based on how their name correlates with their gender. Springer (2012) also reminds the readers of Jessica Simpson’s child, Maxwell Drew, her daughter (Springer, 2012, par. 7). When people see celebrities and people in the spotlight doing something, it starts to slowly become a trend. The naming trend could be one of them. Maxwell is a name that you most definitely do not see in girls very often at all, it is a name that has been considered a “boy name” for quite some time. There are other alternative girl names that sound quite close to Maxwell such as Maxine, but it is a great breakthrough to remember these little milestones made by those in the spotlight.

Our language has gender based all throughout, especially when it comes to naming, but it is hard to notice when you’re not looking for it. Social norms are something that play a large part in this idea. Society creates these notions and takes them to a whole new level. Whether it is with your professional life, your everyday life, or even your social life, your name plays a larger role than one may believe. It may not be a legal issue when it comes to naming in America, but it is a social issue that causes a lot of assumptions. Although it may be a small issue with this country, people are slowly defying social norms, naming their children the wonderful names that they themselves want. Language, names, and gender play a large role together, but with the small fluctuations year by year, that might change.

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